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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000184

SIPDIS

NSC FOR WILDER AND PHU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/3/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KJUS](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [ECON](#) [EINV](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: LOWER NORTH LEADERS SAY NATIONAL STALEMATE HARDENING; DON'T
EXPECT POLITICIANS TO FIND WAY OUT

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 144 (NEXT MOVE WILL COME FROM COURTS, NOT POLITICIANS)
[1](#)B. BANGKOK 3529 (THAI COURT DISSOLVES PPP)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Mike Morrow, CG, ConGen, Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary and Comment

[1](#)1. (C) Consul General discussed Thailand's national political impasse with local politicians during a trip to two lower north provinces just prior to the December 2 court ruling dissolving the governing People's Power Party. All interlocutors, in a trend reflective of similar conversations in the region (Ref A), were unable to describe what a resolution to the long-running crisis might look like. Moreover, each expected "somebody else" - the courts, the King, or the military - to lead the way to ending the stalemate instead of the politicians themselves. CG underscored to all interlocutors the USG's position that the situation should be resolved peacefully and within the rule law and Thailand's democratic institutions. End Summary and Comment.

"Rice Bowl" as Electoral Battleground

[1](#)2. (U) Consul General traveled to the lower north provinces of Kamphaeng Phet and Phichit in Thailand's "rice bowl" region December 1-2. Both provinces have smallish populations and primarily agrarian economies, and are major rice producers. Politically, the two provinces could be described as "battleground" provinces. Phichit's four parliamentary seats were split in last year's election among three parties, none of which were the governing People's Power Party (PPP). In the two elections before that, the results fluctuated. PPP's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) antecedent took three seats to the opposition Democrat Party's (DP) one in 2005, which reversed the 2001 result (three DP seats to one TRT seat). In Kamphaeng Phet, TRT had swept all five seats in 2005, then PPP lost three of them to the DP in 2007 - the Democrat Party's largest gain in any northern province last year.

Royal Action Favored Over New Elections

13. (C) In Kamphaeng Phet CG met with the province's elected Senator, former provincial Governor Krit Athitkaew, and first-term Democrat Party parliamentarian Samran Sriplaengnam, who had risen up through local political office. (Note: two other parliamentarians, including a PPP member, were last-minute no-shows). We met the day before the Constitutional Court issued its widely expected ruling to dissolve the PPP and two other coalition parties (Ref B). Both politicians were eagerly anticipating the ruling, and expressed hope that it would be followed by a clear political signal from King Bhumibol during his December 4 annual birthday message, which together would set the stage for the formation of a national unity government. They provided no details, however, on what such a government would look like or how it would operate.

14. (C) Neither politician was in favor of holding new elections soon. With not quite a year having passed since the last elections, a new ballot would not be worth the time or expense, and the results would not likely change much. CG asked whether the anti-government People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) would transform itself into a political party and compete in future elections, and whether it could make inroads with voters in the PPP's strongholds in the North and Northeast. Both politicians doubted that PAD was ready to become a political party, saying its support base was too diverse. They also doubted any party could make near-term gains in PPP strongholds. Senator Krit expressed disdain toward rural voters in the North and Northeast, dismissing them as "low-class" people who "cling to (former PM) Thaksin" and do not vote "with their heads." He spoke in favor of the "new politics" model previously floated by PAD leaders, which initially called for replacing the elected parliament with a hybrid body that would have 70% of its members appointed and the other 30% elected.

Democrat Party Vows to Play Harder Next Time

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15. (C) The DP's Samran said his party would approach future elections more aggressively than it did in 2007. He claimed his party stood down in some urban areas to create room for candidates from smaller parties to win, in hopes of forming a DP-led government. But the smaller parties (the five that ended up joining the PPP-led government) underperformed, badly missing their projected target of seats, especially in the North and Northeast. The DP, on the other hand, met its nationwide targets, Samran said. Next time around, he asserted, his party would be more aggressive and would not stand down in any district.

16. (C) Samran lamented how difficult it was to compete with the PPP financially. He said the DP was hampered in fund-raising by its internal rule prohibiting the party from promising cabinet seats to big campaign contributors. Although Samran did not mention vote-buying (believed to be widely prevalent in Thai election campaigns), the issue did come up in a meeting the next day with the Phichit office of the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT). The office's Director, a former Governor of the province, spoke openly about the extent to which vote-buying continues to plague Thai elections. He did not mention the PPP by name, though that party was clearly the implied target of his concern.

Third Parties Equivocate in Face of Red/Yellow Hardening

17. (C) Senator Krit and MP Samran remarked how both sides in the country's current political stand-off between "red" (the color favored by pro-government forces) and "yellow" (the PAD-led opposition's color) had hardened their positions and made compromise increasingly difficult. The PPP clings to its electoral mandate and sees no reason to give up its governing role, whereas the PAD refuses to accord legitimacy to the 2007

election results and thus sees any PPP-led government as illegitimate. Regarding possible roles for third parties in resolving the stand-off:

-- The two politicians do not see a role for civil society, which is just as deeply divided between "red" and "yellow" as are the country's politicians. The division exists within every university, every company, and even many families. Senator Krit related that his extended family, which lives together in a compound of 11 households, has had to stop taking its traditional morning meal together for three months now due to sharp political differences.

-- Senator Krit said the Royal Thai Army (RTA) has "played a helpful role by not playing a role." He explained that the RTA, by not fulfilling its formal duty to support the government and help restore law and order, has played the most appropriate role it can play.

-- The DP's Samran, while making it clear that his party and the PAD were two different political animals, did not believe the DP was in a position to mediate between the "red" and "yellow."

Who Wins?

18. (C) Looking ahead, Krit and Samran anticipated that the PPP would be weakened by its dissolution, and cautioned against assuming that all its parliamentarians would join together under the banner of Puea Thai (formed by pro-Thaksin figures as a backup vehicle in the event of PPP dissolution). CG heard a different take, however, from the Governor of Phichit province the following day. He expects that, in the next election, voter backlash against PAD's extreme tactics would deliver sympathy votes for PPP/Puea Thai on the part of Thais who feel resentful that PAD never gave the PPP-led government a proper chance to govern.
MORROW